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Review of the national competitive recruitment examination as a recruitment tool

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Review of the national competitive recruitment examination as a recruitment tool" (JIU/REP/2007/9).



REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL COMPETITIVE RECRUITMENT EXAMINATION AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Review of the National Competitive Recruitment Examination (NCRE) as a recruitment tool JIU/REP/2007/9

Main findings and conclusions

- The National Competitive Recruitment Examination (NCRE) was formally established in 1980 by General Assembly resolution 35/210, which decided, "at the P-1 and P-2 levels, recruitment shall be made as a rule through competitive examinations".
- Since then, NCRE has been used as a recruitment tool by the United Nations Secretariat to select highly qualified young professionals at entry level (P-2), through competitive examinations offered to countries that are not represented, or are not adequately represented in the Secretariat. It consists of two parts: the examination portion, including a written examination and an interview, and roster management and placement. Successful candidates are put on the NCRE roster, and programme managers can select and recruit from the roster for a vacant P-2 post.
- This review covers the entire examination and recruitment process, including its regulations and rules, operation, effectiveness and cost efficiency, as well as its impact on the recruitment results of the Organization.
- Based on their findings, the Inspectors conclude that, in general, NCRE serves well the objectives set by the General Assembly. It provides the Organization with highly qualified professional staff at entry level. NCRE is a useful, objective and competitive tool to identify applicants who have excellent professional knowledge and skills suitable for positions in the United Nations. The overall satisfaction rate of programme managers with the performance of NCRE-recruited staff is high.
- The Inspectors note that the fact that the examination is offered only to nationals from countries that are not represented, or are not adequately represented in the Secretariat, serves the purpose of improving the geographical composition of the Secretariat. Thus NCRE contributes to achieving the objective of equitable geographical representation set by the General Assembly. However, since NCRE is only one of the recruitment channels used by the United Nations, it alone cannot secure the required geographical distribution of staff.
- The Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) statistics for the last five years (2002 to 2006) show that NCRE also helps to improve the gender balance in the composition of the Secretariat. The proportion of female staff among the NCRE-recruited staff is 56.8 per cent.
- The average cost of putting a successful candidate onto the roster over the past several years has varied between US\$ 5,700 and US\$ 17,400, and is influenced fundamentally by the number of applicants in a given year. The Inspectors are of the opinion that the NCRE system is a cost-effective recruitment tool compared with the normal fees of specialized headhunting companies, as well as with the costs of recruitment in some international organizations outside the United Nations.

- The average time of the NCRE cycle from the beginning of planning to the end of the examination is about two years, while the final placement takes a further six months to three years. The excessively long duration of the NCRE cycle makes the exercise simply too slow to meet the demands of the Organization and the legitimate expectations of the candidates on the roster.
- The Inspectors also found that in order to ensure the stability, consistency, accountability and transparency of the NCRE process, there is a need to formulate administrative regulations governing NCRE. The planning process is unreliable and it is not part of the overall strategic labour force planning for the Organization.
- The roster management phase of the NCRE process faces more problems and operational difficulties: the high number of candidates and long waiting period on the roster; the significant level of vacancies in P-2 posts; the lack of online access and search tools in the roster database available for use by programme managers; the inadequate update of the roster database; the recruitment freeze from the roster in some months to implement other recruitment exercises; and the lack of effective information technology to support communication between NCRE candidates, OHRM and programme managers. Comprehensive measures are needed at the operational level to address these difficulties.
- On the strategic level, there is a need for increased "corporate responsibility", shared not only at the level of operational managers but also at the senior management level, and depending on the strategic labour force planning results, there is a need to have a long-term strategy elaborated and approved for the future operation of NCRE in the overall recruitment process of the United Nations.
- The Inspectors also call for closer cooperation on the competitive examination among United Nations organizations within the framework of the Human Resources Network of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). Mutual recognition of test results, or interactions on the better utilization of the existing rosters, could be beneficial for the recruitment process of other United Nations organizations, and would improve and facilitate future inter-agency mobility, too.
- Below is the recommendation addressed to the General Assembly. Other recommendations (recommendations 2 to 9) are proposed for the consideration of the Secretary-General. The implementation of these recommendations would increase the effectiveness and efficiency of human resources management, in particular the speed and quality of the NCRE recruitment process.

Recommendation for consideration by the General Assembly

- **The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to report to its sixty-third session on the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report, in particular, those aimed at reducing the length of the NCRE process and improving the NCRE roster management.**

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ABBREVIATIONS

BOA	Board of Auditors
CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
CREB	Central Recruitment and Examinations Board
EPSO	European Personnel Selection Office
ETS	Examinations and Tests Section (of OHRM)
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
NCRE	National Competitive Recruitment Examination
OHRM	Office of Human Resources Management
PAMS	Planning, Administration and Monitoring Service (of OHRM)
PAS	Performance Appraisal System
SBE	Specialized Board of Examiners
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WHO	World Health Organization

1. INTRODUCTION

1. As part of its programme of work for 2007, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) undertook to conduct a review from March 2007 to July 2007 entitled "The National Competitive Recruitment Examination (NCRE) as a recruitment tool".
2. The overall objective of the review is to provide the General Assembly with an external assessment of the National Competitive Recruitment Examination (NCRE) system at the examination and recruitment stages, including its rules and regulations, operation, effectiveness and cost efficiency, as well as its impact on the recruitment results of the Organization.
3. The NCRE system is a recruitment tool used by the United Nations Secretariat to select highly qualified young professionals at entry level (P-2) through competitive examinations offered to countries that are not represented or are not adequately represented (in quantitative terms) in the United Nations Secretariat. It consists of two major parts: the examination portion, which includes a written examination and an interview; and roster management and placement. The written examination consist of two parts: the general examination paper aims to test drafting skills and the ability of the candidate to use one of the working languages of the United Nations; the specialized examination paper aims to test, through essays and questions, the professional skills and the knowledge required in the given occupational group. They are held simultaneously in different geographical locations and are organized in cooperation with Member States. The interview is a competency-based interview for those candidates who succeed in the written examination. After interviews the successful candidates are put on the NCRE roster, and programme managers can select and recruit from among them for vacant P-2 posts.
4. Following a suggestion approved by the General Assembly¹ in 1971 and more specific proposals in a JIU report entitled "Personnel problems in the United Nations",² the first NCRE examinations were held during 1974 in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany.³ Recourse to competitive examinations for the recruitment of junior professional staff was made compulsory in 1980 by paragraph 10 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 35/210, which decided that, "at the P-1 and P-2 levels, recruitment shall be made as a rule through competitive examinations".
5. During the last 25 years the NCRE examination and recruitment practice have gone through significant qualitative and quantitative developments, including significant increases in the number of participating countries and applicants, and an increased range of occupational groups in which the examinations have been held. The content and form of the written examinations and interviews, as well as their evaluation, have evolved significantly, although the major objectives and basic organizational set-up remain unchanged. The general statistical data on NCRE are shown in annex II. The flow chart in Box I (below) illustrates the whole NCRE process.
6. This JIU review covers the entire examination and recruitment process, starting from the planning of the examinations up to the final placement of the successful roster candidates to specific regular posts in the United Nations Secretariat. As successful NCRE candidates are recruited for career service in the United Nations Secretariat, their interaction with, and impact on, human resources management are long lasting, starting from the date they submit their applications until the date they retire or separate from the Organization. The current review focuses on the initial but also critical part of the NCRE process, i.e., how the entire examination

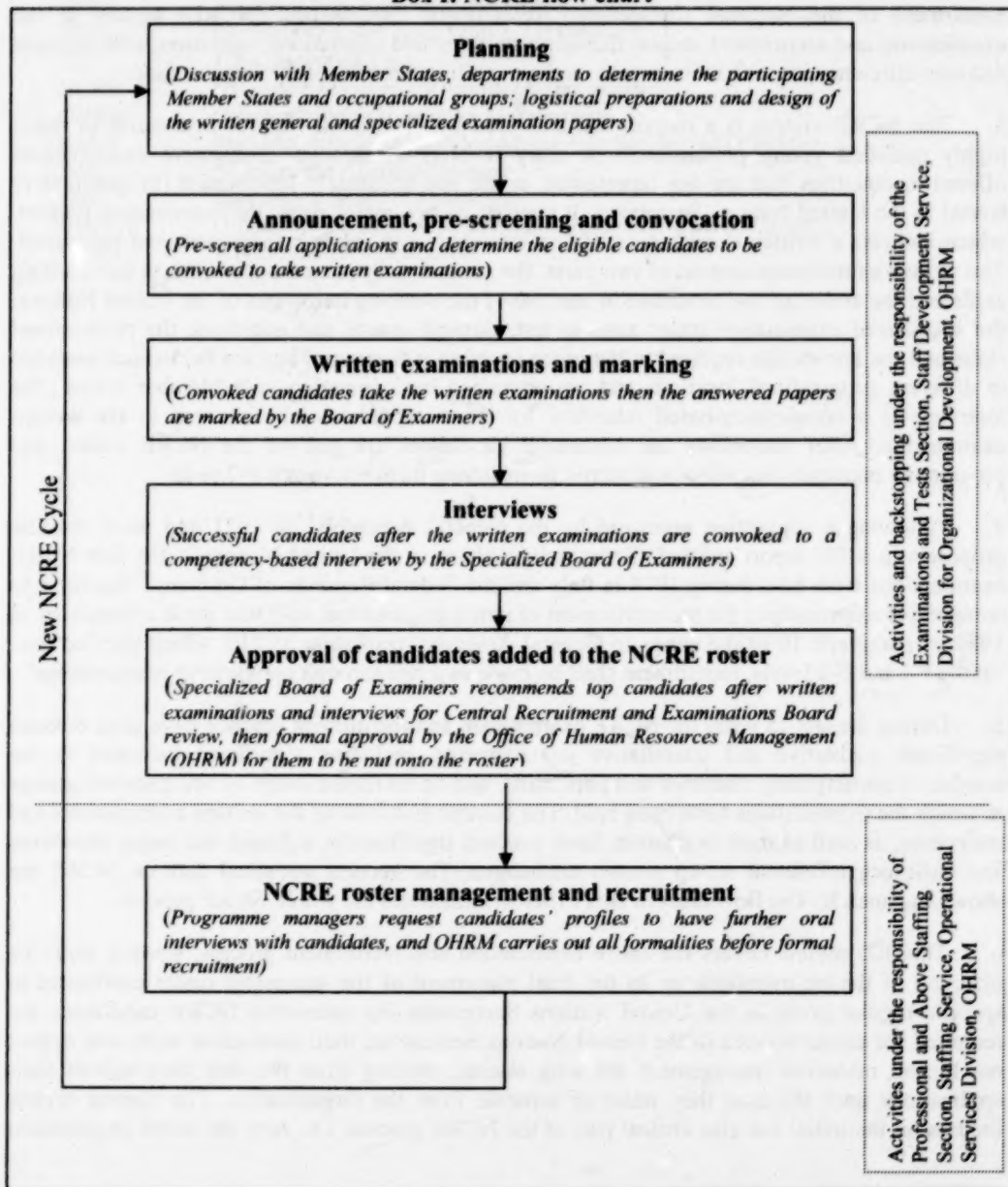
¹ General Assembly resolution 2736 (XXV), para. 2 (d).

² JIU/REP/71/7 distributed as A/8454, chap. IV, part III; summarized in JIU/REP/71/7 (Summary) (distributed as A/8826), part II, sect. I. B (mimeographed).

³ Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs, Supplement No 5 (1970 - 1978), volume 5.

and recruitment mechanism is working to bring the required staff on board. JIU has already addressed some aspects of the career development of NCRE-recruited staff in a previous report issued in 2000, in the context of young professionals in several United Nations organizations.⁴ In the interviews for the current review, a number of career development issues were raised which may justify a specific review of this subject in the future.

Box 1: NCRE flow chart



⁴ JIU/2000/7, "Young Professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention".

7. In accordance with the internal standards and guidelines of JIU and its internal working procedures, the methodology followed in preparing this report included a detailed desk review, questionnaires, interviews and in-depth analysis.

8. Two separate online questionnaires were sent to NCRE-recruited staff and their managers in the Secretariat, in order to get their views and comments on the operation of the NCRE system. In total, 451 managers who have been acting as First Reporting Officer (FRO) to NCRE-recruited staff, and 813 NCRE-recruited staff presently working in the Secretariat, were invited to take these two questionnaires. Among them, 131 managers (29 per cent) and 440 NCRE-recruited staff (54 per cent) submitted complete replies to the Unit. Considering the high number and percentage of replies, as well as their distribution among duty stations and different departments, the Inspectors are of the view that the replies provide a meaningful and representative statistical sample of opinions Secretariat-wide. The Inspectors are also impressed by the overwhelming reply rate (over 50 per cent) from NCRE-recruited staff, which in a certain way demonstrates the high expectations of and enthusiastic support for the NCRE system by the staff.

9. The Inspectors, through interviews in person and by video conference, have also sought the views of the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) personnel in charge of examinations, roster management and NCRE recruitment, both at Headquarters and at offices away from Headquarters; members of the Central Recruitment and Examinations Board (CREB); several members of the Specialized Board of Examiners (SBE); programme managers supervising NCRE-recruited staff; staff representatives; and NCRE-recruited staff. In addition, the Inspectors also had discussions with a number of other international organizations, including the World Bank, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Health Organization (WHO), which run a similar competitive recruitment process.

10. Comments from the United Nations Secretariat on the draft report have been sought and taken into account in finalizing the report.

11. In accordance with article 11.2 of the JIU statute, this report has been finalized after consultation among the Inspectors so as to test its conclusions and recommendations against the collective wisdom of the Unit.

12. To facilitate the handling of the report and the implementation of its recommendations and the monitoring thereof, annex VIII contains a table indicating whether the report is submitted to the organizations concerned for action or for information. The table identifies whether the recommendations require a decision by the Organization's legislative or governing body or can be acted upon by the Secretary-General.

13. The Inspectors wish to express their appreciation to all who assisted them in the preparation of this report, and particularly to those who participated in the interviews and the online questionnaires and so willingly shared their knowledge and expertise.

II. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE NCRE SYSTEM

14. During the 25 years of its existence, various aspects of its operation have been reviewed by Member States, but no separate, overall assessment of the NCRE system at large has been conducted. Therefore, the Inspectors considered it important to formulate an overall assessment of whether the NCRE system has achieved the three main objectives formulated in the relevant General Assembly resolutions, namely:

- to provide qualified professionals for the Organization;
- to improve geographical representation;
- to improve gender balance.

15. In fact, the first two objectives are well defined in Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations, which states: "The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff ... shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible". The latest reform proposal of the Secretary-General⁵ profoundly echoed this requirement for a highly qualified, independent international civil service, stating "the quality of our staff determines the success of the Organization, since it cannot succeed unless it attracts and retains the right people to carry out the increasingly complex mandates entrusted to it".

16. The Inspectors, based on opinions received from interviews and results of the questionnaires sent to managers, are pleased to confirm that NCRE serves well the objective to provide the Organization with highly qualified professional staff at entry level. Staff recruited through this channel have high-level skills and knowledge. Managers in general are satisfied with the quality of the young professionals recruited through NCRE.

17. Of the managers who replied to the online questionnaires, 49.6 per cent consider that the professional skills and knowledge of the staff recruited through NCRE is excellent, and 34.4 per cent evaluate it as good. Half of the managers indicated that a significant number of candidates on the roster could have been appointed at P-3 level, either immediately or after the compulsory probationary period, as they were already well qualified. However, normally NCRE candidates are appointed to P-2 posts. In fact within four years, half of the staff members recruited through NCRE were promoted from P-2 to P-3, and a similar proportion of those P-3 staff were promoted to P-4 in the following four years. Table 1 shows a comparative assessment by the managers between NCRE-recruited staff and other staff, according to seven important factors of a successful career; the managers evaluated six factors out of the seven positively, the exception being that NCRE staff may need more time to adapt to their work.⁶

⁵ A/60/692, Investing in the United Nations: for a stronger Organization worldwide, Part I. Investing in people

⁶ The high expectations of managers of NCRE-recruited staff, who have less work experience related to specific job assignments, may be the cause of the phenomenon that NCRE-recruited staff need more time to adapt to their work.

Table 1. Comparative assessment of NCRE-recruited staff and other staff according to seven important factors of a successful career

Compared with other staff, NCRE-recruited staff have:	More (percentage)	Equal (percentage)	Less (percentage)
Professional skills and knowledge	33.1	52.5	14.4
Language and drafting skills	27.4	55.6	17.1
Team working skills	19.8	67.2	12.9
Motivation and creativity	37.0	54.6	8.4
Cultural conflicts with others	7.8	75.7	16.5
Commitment to United Nations goals and principles	37.3	60.2	2.5
Time needed to adapt to their work requirements	21.4	65.8	12.8

Source: Responses to JIU questionnaire by managers.

18. The Inspectors are of the view that the competitive nature of the examination process, as well as its fair and objective implementation, endeavours to ensure that only the most skilled and highly qualified candidates can succeed in being put onto the roster. As far as the professional skills and knowledge of the staff recruited through NCRE are concerned, only 3.3 per cent of managers considered that "most of them performed below general expectations". The Inspectors are further convinced, through their own observation, that throughout the entire process, measures to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity are strictly adhered to by all personnel involved, especially the members of SBEs and OHRM staff. The established procedures and practice in this regard are well organized and carried out. Table 2 below shows the highly competitive nature of the examination process.

Table 2. Some key statistical indicators on NCRE (2002 – 2006)

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total number of applicants screened	7,506	13,994	12,731	14,364	2,732
Total number of candidates convoked to written examinations	2,479	3,911	4,033	3,515	1,190
Total number of candidates added to roster	94	172	163	221	55
Total number of recruitments from the roster	79	63	69	87	91

Source: OHRM documents.

19. Concerning the second objective, improving the geographical distribution of the staff of the United Nations Secretariat, the Inspectors note that the fact that the examinations are offered only to nationals from countries that are not represented, or are not adequately represented in the United Nations Secretariat, does serve this purpose. Among current staff members, nationals of 19 countries were recruited exclusively through the NCRE system, and there are 59 countries from which the proportion of their nationals recruited through NCRE is 50 per cent or more.

20. Table 3 below shows the impact of NCRE recruitment on the geographical representation status of Member States. For those 119 countries which had NCRE-recruited staff on board at the beginning of 2007, this table shows their distribution among the indicated five representation

status groups. The "actual status" column shows the actual number of countries at present in each group; the "hypothetical status" column shows the number of countries that would be in each representation status, based on a calculation that assumes there is no NCRE recruitment for them. Under this assumption, the number of staff recruited through NCRE has been deducted from the number of staff from each country. This reduced number of staff for each country would possibly affect the representation status of a specific country. The calculation shows that without recruitments from NCRE, 19 countries would have become unrepresented, and 52 instead of 14 countries would have become underrepresented. It is obvious that NCRE has a visible impact on geographical representation, and without NCRE recruitment, more countries would become under- or unrepresented.

Table 3. Impact of NCRE recruitment on geographical representation status of countries

Type of representation status	Representation status with and without NCREs	
	Actual status (including NCRE staff) (Number of countries)	Hypothetical status (excluding NCRE staff) (Number of countries)
Over-represented	8	3
Above mid-point	20	4
Below mid-point	77	41
Underrepresented	14	52
Unrepresented	0	19
Total	119	119

21. Although NCRE recruitment has had a significant impact on the improvement of geographical representation, it is to be noted that due to the small scale of recruitment from NCRE candidates and also the small number of P-2 posts available, as shown in annex VII, the NCRE should be regarded as only one element determining the geographical composition of United Nations Secretariat staff. The competitive nature of the examination itself restricts any discretionary possibility to include on the roster candidates of certain targeted nationalities for the sake of improving geographical distribution.

22. Regarding the third objective, to improve gender balance, statistics for the last five years (2002 to 2006) show that among the 389 staff recruited from the NCRE roster during this period, 221 (56.8 per cent) of them are female. As of 8 February 2007, of the 462 roster candidates, 251 (54.3 per cent) are female. These numbers show that the NCRE system contributes to gender mainstreaming in the United Nations Secretariat.

23. The 2000 JIU report, "Young Professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention"⁷, indicated that the average cost of identifying a successful candidate and putting them onto the roster in previous years was between US\$ 4,000 and US\$ 14,000. The Inspectors requested similar data for this review: the unit cost is currently between US\$ 5,700 and US\$ 17,400. It is to be noted that the bulk of the cost in running the

⁷ JIU/2000/7

examination is fixed and does not vary with the number of applicants. Therefore, the unit cost per successful candidate fluctuates mainly according to the number of applicants. The average cost per successful candidate is in a similar range to some other international organizations (5,400 euros in EPSO and US\$ 15,000 in the World Bank).

24. The Inspectors are of the opinion that the NCRE system is a cost-effective recruitment tool, comparing favourably to the fees paid to specialized head-hunting companies of around two or three months gross salary, which amounts to more than US\$ 20,000 for a P-2 step I staff member in New York. However, the Inspectors also want to cautiously remind decision-makers of the fact that this average unit cost is not the full cost, as there are some hidden costs which are not counted, such as personnel costs incurred by SBE members during marking and interviewing, the in-kind contribution made by Member States providing examination venues, etc. The costs per successful candidate as well as the cost structure are shown in annex III.

25. Since the number of participating Member States and applicants has significantly increased over the last several years, the simultaneous organization of the examination in about 40 countries, followed by a centralized marking process, requires a huge and complex logistical operation (see annex I). The Inspectors note with appreciation that during the past few years, the Examinations and Tests Section (ETS) of OHRM has ensured the smooth running of the operation of the NCRE examination on an increasing scale; the announcements, convocations and examinations have taken place without significant problems or interruptions. ETS has elaborated and implemented a complex set of measures ensuring the required security, confidentiality, impartiality and respect of cultural and linguistic diversity throughout the entire process. There have been no reported cases of leakage of the test questions or violations of the rules of marking and evaluation. The number of complaints has been insignificant.

26. However, the Inspectors found that some weaknesses previously noted in the JIU 2000 report continue to be relevant:

"The greatest weakness of the NCRE, however, resides in the later stages of the process, most particularly in the placement of candidates. Until now, the NCRE programme decisions were not based on an analysis of organizational needs and were not linked to workforce planning. Candidates were identified regardless of actual needs for staff, which resulted in great delays in placement and the increase in candidates on the roster. Some were no longer available when they were finally called. At the beginning of 1999, and before inclusion of the 1998 successful candidates, the list included more than 200 people, some of whom had taken the examination as early as 1991. This situation led Member States to call on the Secretary-General to adapt the number of occupational groups selected for examinations to the requirements of the Organization. It also requested him to ensure that candidates are placed in a timely fashion and that special efforts are made to recruit candidates from the roster until it is cleared.⁸"

The Inspectors note that these general remarks remain valid at the time of writing this report.

27. The number of listed roster candidates increased again to 485 persons at the end of 2006. The Member States adopted a resolution⁹ in January 2007, in which they expressed their concern that "a large number of candidates who have passed the national competitive examinations remain on the roster for years", and requested the Secretary-General "to ensure the expeditious placement of successful candidates from national competitive examinations".

⁸ See General Assembly resolution 53/221 of 23 April 1999.

⁹ See General Assembly resolution 61/244 of 30 January 2007.

28. The Inspectors note that the entire NCRE process is excessively lengthy. As shown in Table 4 (below), it took on average over 200 days to complete the examination part alone,¹⁰ and the final placement takes an additional six months to three years. This long processing and waiting time is simply too slow to meet the frequently changing demands of a dynamic Organization. The Inspectors consider that it is also damaging to the reputation of the Organization.

29. In general, the Inspectors are of the view that the current NCRE system meets the general objectives mandated by Member States, but the operation of the NCRE system does need to be improved. On the operational level, there is a need for increased use of the latest information technologies over the entire process, including the examination, roster management and final placement; more coherence is required between the different elements of the process; and its excessive length should be reduced. On the strategic level, there is a need for increased "corporate responsibility", shared not only at the level of operational managers but also at the senior management level; and, depending on the strategic labour force planning results, there is also a need to have a long-term strategy elaborated and approved for the future operation of NCRE within the overall recruitment process of the United Nations.

30. The following recommendation will improve management through enhanced effectiveness by means of the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report under the close oversight of the General Assembly.

Recommendation 1

The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to report to its sixty-third session on the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report, in particular, those aimed at reducing the length of the NCRE process and improving the NCRE roster management.

¹⁰ The number of days is counted from the date when the convoked candidates take the written examination until the list of successful candidates is approved. The processing time before the written examination is not counted, namely the period of preliminary planning; consultation with those Member States to be invited to participate in the examination; the period for candidates to submit their applications; the pre-screening processing time; and the logistical arrangements before the written examination.

III. DETAILED FINDINGS

A. Inadequate regulation of the NCRE process

31. The relevant General Assembly resolutions constitute the legal basis for holding NCRE. Member States, in General Assembly resolution 35/210, decided to hold competitive examinations for the recruitment of junior professional staff, and in its annex determined the guidelines for organizing such examinations:

“Competitive examinations under the plan shall be devised on a national basis, in consultation with the Governments concerned. They shall contain measures to protect the confidentiality and objectivity of the methods of selection and to ensure that the methods of testing take into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of the membership of the United Nations. They shall be geared to candidates with at least a first-level university degree. The examinations should be based on written tests in one of the official languages of the United Nations, including a general test, specialized examination by occupational groups and personal interview. They may be organized simultaneously by groups of countries ... taking into account the geographical representation of each Member State. A reserve list shall be established from which all P-1 and P-2 posts will be filled.”

Although the General Assembly resolutions of later years relating to human resources management have modified certain elements of this mandate more than once, the fundamental provisions concerning NCRE remain unchanged.

32. Rule 104.15 of the Staff Regulations stipulates that “the Board of Examiners established by the Secretary-General shall ensure the regularity of the competitive examinations administered in accordance with the conditions established by the Secretary-General”, and further defines its role in appointments and recruitment. ETS, through case-by-case managerial decisions over the years, has established a set of measures covering the announcement and convocation of the examinations, pre-screening of applications, organization of written examinations and interviews, marking of general and specialized papers, operation of the boards of examiners, and identification of successful candidates.

33. At present, most of the operations of the NCRE examination process are based on individual managerial decisions and informally established practices. It especially takes into account the modus operandi of the G-to-P examination, including the operation of its Central Recruitment and Examinations Board. At the same time, there is no administrative instruction detailing the provisions for holding NCRE and its evaluation, or the responsibility of CREB and SBE for NCRE. The currently applied procedures are not publicly available, resulting in a lack of transparency for Member States and applicants. Thus, the stakeholders of the Organization have no clear and transparent information on the many critical details of the process, such as the criteria applied to organize the examinations in different countries or occupational groups; the pre-screening of applicants; the principles and rules of marking the written examinations; the organization of the interviews; the appointment of members of SBE, their authority and responsibilities; the weighting of results in written examinations and interviews during the final selection phase, etc. With a few exceptions, the delegation of authority is also not governed by written rules.

34. The Inspectors note with satisfaction that the practice established by ETS over the years concerning the examinations part implements, in general, the mandate formulated in the relevant General Assembly resolutions, including the requirement to protect confidentiality, objectivity and anonymity in the selection process, and to respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of

candidates from different Member States. At the same time, it is the firm view of the Inspectors that the most important procedural details of the process should be regulated in an administrative issuance to ensure stability, consistency, accountability and transparency. They recognize that certain elements of the process need some flexibility to meet changing needs, and should be managed through ad hoc high-level managerial decisions. However, the present situation, where most of the fundamental elements of such a complex process are governed only by a general mandate and unregulated established practice, should be discontinued. A properly detailed legal regulation of the basic provisions of NCRE would contribute to more accountability, better oversight by Member States and an increase in confidence in the Organization at large.

35. The following recommendation will improve management through enhanced effectiveness by regulating the NCRE process, and increasing transparency.

Recommendation 2

The Secretary-General should regulate, through an administrative issuance, the entire NCRE process including the announcement, convocation and organization of NCRE with clear delegation of authority on the different elements in the decision-making and operational process.

B. Unreliable planning process

36. The planning of NCRE usually starts in the early spring of the year before the examination is to be held. The purpose of this planning is to define - on the basis of the expected recruitment needs and the number of candidates already on the roster - the occupational groups in which the competitive examinations are to be held, to identify the countries whose nationals are eligible to participate, to negotiate with the countries concerned on their readiness to host the written examinations, and to fix the venue of the examinations.

37. Currently the entire planning process is done by ETS, which does not have the required information, working relations with the different departments across the Organization, necessary human resources or professional expertise to make reliable labour force projections for the coming period. The lack of reliable projections constitutes a serious obstacle for ETS in calculating properly the Organization's needs in different occupational groups and for different time frames. The present forecasting done by ETS is more or less a static reproduction of the previous year's recruitment figures, and does not constitute proactive, strategic labour force planning. Further, unreliable forecasts risk creating, maintaining or increasing a gap between the needs of the Organization and the numbers of candidates on the roster. Table 2 above shows that during the period from 2002 to 2006, in total 705 candidates were added to the roster, while only 389 candidates were actually recruited.

38. The present situation is merely a result of the earlier practice followed year after year from the time when labour force planning did not exist in the Organization. The Inspectors are concerned that the already established Planning, Administration and Monitoring Service (PAMS) in OHRM is not involved in this type of planning for NCRE, although by definition, it should have the necessary planning, methodological and professional knowledge and information needed for such a task. The Inspectors are aware of the fact that strategic labour force planning is a new task assigned to PAMS, and the related work is still at an initial phase. However, they are of the firm view that the number and composition of NCRE candidates on the roster should be part of

the overall strategic human resources planning of this unit, and this task should not be assigned to ETS, which was established for the purpose of implementing the examination process.

39. During the planning process, in order to optimise future recruitment efforts, more attention needs to be paid to the actual composition of the candidates on the roster. At present, ETS and the unit in charge of roster management (Staffing Service) are under two different divisions in OHRM and do not have sufficiently coherent working relations. Due to the non-involvement of the unit responsible for roster management during the planning phase, ETS considers only the number of candidates on the roster in a given occupational group. No attention is paid to the internal composition of the candidates, such as the period they have been on the roster, language skills and geographical distribution. This may create further obstacles for timely recruitment.

40. Competitive examinations have been held for 22 occupational groups, and in a given year usually seven to eight occupational groups are covered by NCRE (see annex IV for a list of occupational groups). It is to be noted that the number of occupational groups is increasing; some occupational groups are becoming more and more specialized. This is the result of increasing pressure from programme managers who are interested in recruiting specialists who can take up the job with the shortest possible period of training and development. Therefore ETS has been forced to organize more specialized examinations. One example is the former occupational group of information technology, which has been fragmented, and now includes a new specialized group for web designers.

41. While the Inspectors recognize that changing needs may justify modifications to the occupational groups, they are of the view that further specializations, unless they are well managed, may create long-term and short-term problems for human resources management. Staff members recruited at entry level through NCRE get permanent contracts, and such specialized recruitment goes against the established human resources policy of the Organization, which foresees a versatile, competent and mobile staff working in different duty stations, in different areas and in similar but not necessarily identical jobs throughout their career.

42. The overspecialization of occupational groups creates short-term problems as well, including more demands for examinations and more resource commitments from SBES, more candidates on the roster, more administrative burdens, etc.

43. It is the Inspectors' view that the proliferation of occupational groups should be addressed. In the light of the strategic objectives of the human resources policy of the United Nations, the attempts to further narrow specialization at entry level should be avoided. The justified needs of managers for specific knowledge or skills could be satisfied without increasing the number of occupational groups; for example, alternative test questions could be included in the examinations, and the results reflected in the profiles and skills inventories of the candidates on the roster.

44. Currently, the nationals of un- or underrepresented countries, as well as those whose countries are critically below midpoint in terms of geographical representation, can all participate in NCRE. Inclusion of the countries below midpoint to some extent contributes to the accumulation of high numbers of candidates on the roster, and makes roster management difficult. Statistics indicate that in general, high numbers of nationals from the countries below midpoint are successful in NCRE. Although the representation status of these countries is below midpoint, they are still within the normal range. As a result, with limited recruitment, the representation status of these countries may easily change to over-represented, while significant numbers of candidates from these countries still remain on the roster. If these countries become over-represented, the possibility of their successful candidates being recruited becomes less

likely, which may result in an accumulation on the roster of high numbers of candidates having to wait long periods. On the one hand, it makes the roster management more difficult; on the other hand, it raises the question of fair treatment of the candidates, for whom it is difficult to accept the negative consequences of the "change of rule" during the recruitment process.

45. Obviously, this can be alleviated by fine-tuning the criteria for participation in NCRE and the method of pre-screening. The Board of Auditors (BOA) made a recommendation – in the framework of their audit on geographical distribution – "to lower the existing ceiling of candidates authorized to enter the NCRE per country and per professional exam". OHRM plans to lower the ceiling in 2008 from 50 to 40 candidates in the pre-screening of the applicants. While the Inspectors agree that it may help to reduce the number of candidates from countries whose representation status may change to over-represented, it cannot solve the problem completely. Therefore, the problem of candidates whose countries' representation status changes after the examinations needs to be addressed creatively, such as through a more flexible recruitment practice, including offering these candidates employment possibilities in peacekeeping missions or through inter-agency recruitment. To facilitate that, a fresh look into the present contractual arrangements for the employment of NCRE candidates might be needed.

46. The following two recommendations will improve management by enhancing the effectiveness of the NCRE planning process and the determination of occupational groups.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General should take concerted measures to improve the reliability of NCRE-related labour force planning and to make it an integral and coherent part of the overall strategic labour force planning for the Organization.

Recommendation 4

The Secretary-General should ensure that the identification of occupational groups in which competitive examinations are held is in line with the overall human resources policy of the Organization.

C. More targeted publicity in un- and underrepresented countries during the application phase

47. NCRE is open only to nationals of un- and underrepresented Member States, and those who are critically below the midpoint, i.e., at risk of becoming underrepresented. Statistics in annex VII show that the number of candidates from the nationals of un- and underrepresented countries among those recruited is low (below 30 per cent), which is due to the low number of successful candidates on the roster from these countries.

48. An increase in the number of successful candidates from these countries can only be achieved through a higher level of willingness and cooperation of the Member States concerned for holding NCRE examinations. During the last five years, one third of un- or underrepresented countries declined to participate, including about half of the unrepresented countries (see annex VI).

49. There is a need to increase the number of applicants participating in NCRE from those un- and underrepresented countries, which, so far, have not had sufficient successful candidates. Statistics show that there is a relatively strong correlation between the number of applicants and the number of successful candidates.

50. The Inspectors welcome the proactive efforts made by ETS beyond the normal application process, such as approaching eligible candidates from these countries identified by ETS in the Galaxy system database (www.jobs.un.org), intensive dialogue with the Permanent Missions concerned, or targeted communications with academic/educational institutions, etc. The Inspectors call for further joint efforts between the United Nations and Member States to increase the number of applicants, and consequently the chances of successful candidates, from these countries. More and better-targeted publicity through advertisements in local media would help to increase public awareness of NCRE in these countries.

51. The Board of Auditors in its recent audit recommended pursuing a proactive policy of advocacy, targeting those countries that are un- or underrepresented, including allocating more financial resources for that purpose. The Inspectors concur with this recommendation, especially in the light of the fact that the budget allocation in ETS for that purpose has been minimal throughout the past few years. The Inspectors are of the view that relatively small financial resources would be required for a more targeted advocacy of the NCRE examinations in a few selected un- and underrepresented countries, which might in return encourage a higher number of applications and consequently a higher chance of successful candidates from these countries.

D. Reduce the length of the NCRE cycle

52. One of the most frequent criticisms of NCRE is the long duration of the NCRE cycle. The examination part, from planning to placing candidates on the roster, takes about two years, and the placement of the majority of successful candidates on the roster from the same year's cohort to specific vacant posts takes an additional three years on average. The length of the process is a matter of concern for managers, since during this long cycle important changes may have taken place in recruitment needs. Also, the excessively long period of the examination, combined with the prolonged waiting period on the roster, increases the risk that successful candidates may opt for other job opportunities. This excessively long waiting period, together with the shortcomings of the United Nations Secretariat labour force planning, constitute the major difficulties of the NCRE process.

53. The 2-year examination cycle comprises the period starting from the selection of the occupational groups and the list of countries to be invited to participate, to the successful candidates being put on the roster. Looking into the practice of other international organizations (the European Union, and the World Bank), it is to be noted that their selection cycles are shorter, at about 8 to 14 months.

54. While the Inspectors recognize the special circumstances of the United Nations NCRE system compared with other international organizations, namely the worldwide scope of the countries concerned, as well as the involvement of Member States in organizing the examinations, they are of the view that the duration of the NCRE cycle could and should be shortened. It is imperative to identify ways to reduce the length of the cycle in all phases: (a) planning, application for and convocation of written examinations; (b) marking of the written papers and holding the interviews; and (c) length of time on the roster.

55. The Inspectors see the possibility of reducing the length of the cycle in all the phases, although certain measures may require some additional financial or human resources. However, on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis, it may be advisable to allocate some additional resources.

56. In paragraphs 36 to 46 above, the Inspectors have made proposals to improve the NCRE planning process, which among other benefits may result in shortening the convocation period and improving roster management. Additionally, an accelerated reaction and decision-making process by Member States might also further shorten the convocation period.

57. The Secretariat, through a coordinated set of measures, may further reduce the current excessive length of the process in the examination phase, as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Table 4. Length of examination process in some occupational groups (2004 - 2006)

Occupational group (year)	Written exam (days)	Interview (days)	Total days
Statistics (2006)	93	70	163
Security (2006)	115	53	168
Administration (2005)	136	63	199
Library (2006)	174	35	209
Information technology. (2004)	173	48	221
Social Affairs (2004)	129	93	222
Humanitarian Affairs (2005)	205	53	258
Finance (2005)	213	76	289
Political Affairs (2004)	279	128	407

Source: ETS documentation

58. The Inspectors are of the view that it would be possible to significantly reduce the length of the examination process, by implementing the following set of measures: more use of computer technology in the application, data entry and convocation process; speed up the mailing and processing of the examination documents; ensure the full-time commitment of all members of SBEs for the period required to mark the written examinations; and provide the necessary budgetary resources to ETS at peak times in the examination process to use retirees or external consultants to complement SBEs. In addition, the beginning and end of the marking process and interviews should be set and announced.

59. These measures may need a one-time, as well as some recurring, additional human and financial resources. The Inspectors note that ETS has prepared a set of measures requiring an additional US\$ 200,000 to US\$ 400,000, which if implemented would result in a significant shortening of the process without having to make significant changes to the present examination system. The Inspectors consider this a relatively small sum to solve a very sensitive issue. The Inspectors suggest further study on the feasibility of computerizing the application process, in particular, pre-screening, and perhaps also computerizing the written examination. This is already an emerging practice in some other international entities such as UNHCR, WHO and the European Union.

60. The following recommendation will improve management by enhancing the efficiency of the NCRE process through reducing its length.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General should elaborate and implement a set of measures to reduce the length of the present NCRE process, in particular the examination process, by investing commensurate financial resources in the process. The exact dates of the beginning and end of the examination phase should be set and made public.

E. Problems with the operation of the Specialized Boards of Examiners

61. The Specialized Boards of Examiners (SBEs) and the Central Recruitment and Examinations Board (CREB) play an important role in the current NCRE system. They provide the necessary expertise for the examination through appointments from in-house staff. The present model seems, at first glance, a "cheap" solution since it does not require additional financial resources, but in fact it contributes to the prolonged processing cycle, and causes conflicting interests/priorities between the routine tasks of the members and the NCRE tasks.

62. SBEs play a decisive role in designing and managing the substantive rather than administrative part of the examination process. A dedicated SBE is appointed for the examination in each occupational group, and is responsible for developing model answers to the examination questions, marking the examination papers, reviewing the results and establishing minimum qualification requirements, recommending candidates to be interviewed, conducting the interviews and recommending the best qualified candidates to be placed on the roster. Depending on the number of applicants sitting the written examination in a given occupational group, an SBE usually consists of 3 to 11 members proposed to OHRM by the Under-Secretaries-General of the related departments. It is considered that a board membership normally implies a workload of at least 10 full working days. The nomination is usually done from among volunteers at P-3 level and above who receive no remuneration for the work performed in this capacity. The Inspectors highly commend the board members for undertaking this very responsible and demanding job carried out in the interests of the Organization. Generally the members are experienced, dedicated and enthusiastic staff members, doing their work often beyond their normal working hours or in conflicting working situations. Their contributions deserve recognition.

63. OHRM, in cooperation with the relevant departments, is in general able to form SBEs, although due to the voluntary nature of this exercise, sometimes there is a problem in obtaining sufficient members in time. While the Inspectors note that SBEs have an acceptable level of gender and cultural diversity, sometimes there is a problem securing the balance between experienced and new members. The Inspectors note also that there are no detailed criteria formulated for the selection of members. Though ETS organizes a basic briefing and training for the staff appointed as members of SBEs, the Inspectors are not aware of any concrete quality control carried out vis-à-vis the nominated members by the departments.

64. The Inspectors would like to draw attention to some problems in the current SBE operation, which seriously affect the efficiency of the examination process, including the lack of sufficient and qualified volunteers, lack of sufficient support from supervisors of board members, and the consequent delays in the formation of SBEs causing delays in the marking process. OHRM requests the departments concerned to ensure the availability and release of those nominated staff members so that they can perform their SBE-related functions. However, the board members often have to accommodate these tasks within their routine tasks. Marking of examinations can often only be done by working extra hours or with significant delays. Several members of the boards indicated that their immediate supervisors do not attach importance to their board work; they do not receive the necessary support, and are not released to perform these tasks during

working hours. The work done by board members is not included in the Performance Appraisal System (PAS), and is not usually considered or appreciated by their immediate supervisors

65. This occurs most often if the organizational units providing SBE members are different from the potential "end user" of the successful candidates. The immediate supervisors of the board members might therefore have less direct interest in the results. There is an obvious contradiction between the interests of the manager of a given organizational unit and the interests of the Organization, resulting in undesirable conflicts in the workplace for board members. Managers may reluctantly make available their personnel for SBEs from usually limited human resources, in the knowledge that there is no possibility of getting a substitute during the absence of the board member. On the other hand, the dedicated and timely work of SBEs serves a long-term strategic objective of the Organization as a whole.

66. The Inspectors note that the operation of similar boards in other international organizations experience similar difficulties, but they have established some built-in mechanisms in the system to ease these tensions. For example, in the World Bank, the working time spent by board members on marking is compensated financially for the releasing organizational unit, and in the European Union, additional bonus points are given to board members in their performance appraisal. It is the firm view of the Inspectors that such an important strategic area as the selection of the future permanent staff of the Organization deserves higher priority at senior level, and a better organizational setting based on increased corporate responsibility.

67. CREB consists of three to four experienced senior professionals (usually at D or P-5 level) who have formerly been members of SBEs. CREB accepts or modifies the recommendations of SBEs. Its functioning is poorly regulated, and it basically operates following the established practice of previous years. Although it may change recommendations from SBEs, in many respects CREB acts as a rubber stamping administrative body, and plays no role in substantial evaluation or oversight of the examination process; this function has in the past occasionally been carried out by ETS. The Inspectors appreciate the efforts by ETS to have occasional external reviews and evaluations of NCRE, but a more regular, continuous activity of this type is required, and it cannot be left entirely to ETS, which is responsible for the operational implementation of NCRE. The Inspectors are of the view that the function of CREB should be strengthened so that it could act more proactively, for example, to reflect the lessons learned in the examination process, to carry out periodic substantial evaluations, and to initiate remedial changes to the entire examination process.

68. Recommendations 6 and 7 will improve management by increasing corporate responsibility, enhancing the effectiveness of SBEs and the role of CREB in the NCRE process.

Recommendation 6

The Secretary-General should initiate measures to ensure that an increased joint corporate responsibility prevails in the Organization and supports the activity of SBEs. To maintain the high quality of the examination process, detailed criteria for the selection of board members should be established and the work of the SBE members should be recognized properly in the PAS evaluation.

Recommendation 7

In the framework of the new administrative issuance regulating the NCRE system, the Secretary-General should reorganize and strengthen CREB with a mandate to play a substantial strategic oversight role in the NCRE process.

F. Ineffective roster management

69. Once the list of successful candidates recommended by CREB is approved by OHRM senior management, it is put on the NCRE roster, from which candidates are recruited for vacant regular posts at P-2 level. The roster management database contains the Personal History Profiles (P-11) of candidates, a short one-page summarized profile, and a list of their academic and employment contacts for reference checking purposes.

70. Since the NCRE roster is not part of the Galaxy system and the database has no built-in search tool, a one-page profile for each candidate is drafted, which provides a summary of general information, academic and work experience, language skills and availability. This profile is the basic information provided to programme managers who are initiating the recruitment from the roster. Candidates are contacted and interviewed by the respective programme managers. The managers, through their human resources management section, inform the NCRE roster management unit in OHRM who has been interviewed, offered a post, and accepted or declined the offer. As the roster management database is not accessible online, neither the programme managers nor the NCRE focal point can monitor the progress of selection in real time.

71. As of 31 December 2006, there were 485 candidates on the roster in 22 occupational groups. Among them, 462 candidates were successful in the P-2 examinations, and 23 of them from the P-3 examinations of previous years (the P-3 NCRE examinations have now been discontinued). The number of candidates put on and recruited from the roster is as follows (see Table 5):

Table 5. Number of candidates put on and recruited from the roster (2002-2006)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total number of candidates
Number of candidates put onto the roster	94	172	163	221	55	705
Number of candidates recruited from the roster	79	63	69	87	91	389

Source: OHRM documentation.

72. It was a widely shared view during the interviews for this report that the roster management phase of the NCRE process entails more problems and operational difficulties than the examination process. This opinion was confirmed by the survey results: 50 per cent of managers stated that they had experienced difficulties caused by an outdated roster and only 12 per cent indicated that they had no difficulties at all with the roster management; 28 per cent of NCRE-recruited staff members expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency in the roster management, while in the case of the examination, this figure is only 12 per cent.

73. The Inspectors would like to point out the following operational problems and shortcomings that need to be addressed in order to increase the efficiency, transparency and reliability of recruitment through NCRE.

1. High number of candidates on the roster

74. There is a significant gap between the number of candidates put on the roster and those hired from the roster (see Table 5 above). The high number of candidates on the roster compared with the relatively low and stable number of candidates recruited results in a continuous surplus of candidates on the roster. This is partly connected with planning problems, but the low number of P-2 posts and their high vacancy rate also play an important role. The vacancy rate at the P-2 level was high for the last five years in most duty stations. At the same time, there were a high number of staff on special post allowance (SPA) to P-2 posts, and staff on short-term appointments at this level (in 2004 and 2005 these figures were 129 and 426 respectively), which significantly slowed down recruitment from the NCRE roster. According to administrative instruction ST/AI/2006/3 on the staff selection system, section 11.3 stipulates, "To expedite placement of successful candidates on the roster from the National Competitive Examination or G-to-P examinations, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management shall have the authority to place those candidates in P-2 posts subject to geographical distribution that, after a period of three months, have not been filled with candidates successful in a competitive examination." The Inspectors welcome this proactive measure to fill vacant P-2 posts in an expeditious way, but as this rule was only recently established, there is no information available to evaluate its impact.

75. The inadequate strategic planning of the labour force needs of the Organization at the P-2 level also plays a role. One of the performance indicators for ETS contains a static target number of candidates identified through NCRE, which does not take into account the actual number of candidates already on the roster. It is further aggravated by the fragmentation of the occupational groups, which results in a higher total number of reserves on the roster as a whole, as well as by insufficient regulation to remove candidates from the roster. As a result, managers often face the situation of too many candidates on the roster, while at the same time there is a lack of traceable candidates for a given job.

2. Long waiting periods on the roster

76. The period between the moment of placement on the NCRE roster and actual recruitment is long. This is the joint result of the high number of successful candidates put on the roster, and the shortcomings of roster management.

**Table 6. Waiting period of successful candidates on the roster as of 31 December 2006
(since the time when they were put onto the roster)**

	Less than 3 months	3 to 6 months	6 to 12 months	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	More than 3 years	Total
Number of candidates	25	13	72	109	119	147	485
Percentage	5	3	15	22	25	30	100

Source: OHRM documentation.

77. It would be appropriate that most of the candidates put on the NCRE roster be recruited within one or two years. Table 6 above shows that 77 per cent of the candidates have been

waiting for recruitment for more than one year, and 55 per cent for more than two years. This is excessively long, and much longer than in other international organizations. This obviously has detrimental effects on both the Organization and the candidates.

3. Lack of integrated recruitment from NCRE, G-to-P examination and the Managed Reassignment Programme for internal P-2 staff

78. The recruitment from NCRE is suspended for a couple of months each year in order to implement the placement programme for the successful candidates from the G-to-P examination, and for the implementation of the internal P-2 Managed Reassignment Programme (MRP) and Voluntary Reassignment Programme (VRP). These mechanisms shorten the time available and slow down recruitment from the NCRE roster, thereby further prolonging the waiting period. It would be desirable to develop and implement an integrated placement system for all P-2 posts and discontinue the present method of using temporary freeze periods.

4. Insufficient and delayed updating of the roster database

79. During the long waiting periods on the roster, there are often important changes in the personal and employment circumstances of the candidates. Since the present roster system does not envisage any proactive participation of the candidates in the recruitment process, the candidates have difficulty updating their profile. This may cause managers confusion and difficulties when they are faced with outdated contact information or a candidate who is no longer interested. Providing the possibility for the roster candidates to update their personal data in the database online would increase the reliability of the database.

5. No agreed and consistent rules for removal of candidates from the list

80. According to the present practice, candidates remain indefinitely on the roster and are removed only if they are recruited, have declined two offers, request to be removed or become untraceable. The NCRE roster management unit conducts a periodic clean-up campaign to determine whether or not candidates should be removed from the roster based on the above criteria.

81. An analysis of actual recruitment between 2002 and 2005 revealed that the best chance for a candidate to be placed occurs between one and three years after they were put onto the roster, and thereafter the applicant's chances of placement decrease significantly. Keeping candidates on the roster who only have a remote chance of being recruited not only increases the administrative burden of programme managers during the recruitment exercise, but makes planning for the next NCRE exercise more difficult and increases the possibility of mistakes in the calculation of the target for the number of candidates to be put on the NCRE roster. The automatic removal of candidates from the roster after a certain number of years should be included as part of a more efficient and effective roster management. At the same time, efforts should be made not to lose the financial resources invested in the testing of these candidates. More ideas on this subject/aspect are elaborated in paragraphs 97 to 99.

6. Difficulty for managers in accessing the roster management database

82. Recruitment from the NCRE roster is done by managers on the basis of the summarized profiles of candidates and their curricula vitae, which are provided by the roster management unit of OHRM by e-mail, on a case-by-case basis. Managers have no direct online access to the roster database to speed up this process. In addition, the lack of a skills inventory of the candidates, and

other shortcomings of the roster design and roster management database, makes the recruitment process longer than desirable, and causes unnecessary administrative burdens for managers.

Table 7. Difficulties most frequently encountered by managers with roster management

Most frequently encountered difficulties	Percentage of managers commenting
Outdated roster	49
Lack of online access to the roster	35
Problems in tracing the candidates	20
Limited number of candidates in the given occupational groups	18
Long wait to get the candidate's profile	12
Occupational groups too fragmented	8
No difficulties with the operation of the present roster system	12

Source: Responses to JIU questionnaire by managers.

83. The staffing service of OHRM is aware of these problems and some of them are to be addressed in the course of the unit's ongoing work. The Inspectors concur with the planned measures to improve roster management that were discussed during the interviews, but consider that it is necessary to take further measures and set concrete time frames for these endeavours.

7. Insufficient IT support for roster management

84. The IT backup of the NCRE roster is weak. The current NCRE roster management process is entirely off-line and labour intensive. Neither ETS nor the roster candidates can update information electronically. It was indicated to the Inspectors that plans are underway to integrate the roster into Galaxy, which would aid managers, who would then be able to access the roster in real time, and allow them to search the database, neither of which are currently possible. It would also serve as a kind of job market, matching the interests and requirements of managers and job seekers on the roster. However, even this new system does not envisage the utilization of such important features as reporting, post management or recruitment, which are vital from the point of view of efficient roster management. OHRM should address these issues at a later stage.

8. Lack of possibilities for candidates to play a more proactive role in recruitment

85. In the framework of the current NCRE recruitment process, the candidates on the roster have no proactive role in searching for placement. After being put onto the roster, they are supposed to wait to be approached and interviewed by programme managers. This long and passive period of waiting is not only frustrating for the candidates but also for managers, as they often waste time in tracing, calling and interviewing candidates who have no interest in the particular post they are seeking to fill.

86. The survey results show that on the part of the candidates on the roster, there is a strong wish and expectation to be allowed to act more proactively to find placement in the United Nations. Only 6 per cent of the respondents are satisfied with the current practice; 62 per cent consider that candidates should be able to see open P-2 vacancies and express their interest; and 52 per cent would be willing to be proactive and send applications directly to the hiring managers. Among the managers, there is also wide support for such changes: only 22 per cent of the respondents are satisfied with the current practice; 61 per cent would support the NCRE candidates applying for P-2 posts, just like the application process applied in Galaxy; and 21 per cent would support NCRE candidates contacting them directly.

87. The Inspectors consider these demands to be justified: their incorporation into the current system would increase client satisfaction and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the recruitment process. The experiences of the examination and recruitment systems of other international organizations also confirm the viability of this direction. The Inspectors are aware of a related proposal by a group of NCRE staff members in Santiago, addressed to the Secretary-General, to make P-2 posts known both to the candidates on the roster and to internal P-2 staff, through the inclusion of these posts into the Galaxy system. The Inspectors understand from the interviews conducted for this review that OHRM is open towards this initiative, but at the time of writing this report, no decision or timetable was available in this regard.

9. Communication problems with candidates on the roster

88. The high number of candidates on the roster, and the generally long waiting period before recruitment, generate a need for frequent communication between OHRM and the candidates. With the current limited human resources, OHRM is in a permanent communication deficit with the candidates. OHRM receives a huge amount of questions and queries from applicants and candidates, which is impossible to manage on an individual basis in a timely manner. From the point of view of applicants, communication-related expectations are high throughout the entire process, but there are more complaints about the lack of information on problems related to the roster management phase of the process. Twenty four per cent of the respondents to the survey have difficulty in understanding how the recruitment process works, and 28 per cent consider that the recruitment process is not transparent at all. Survey responses concerning similar questions about the examination process indicate fewer difficulties, being 14 and 12 per cent respectively.

89. The Inspectors note that ETS is running a website on the NCRE examination (<http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/examin/exam.htm>) and maintains communications by standard letters with candidates at different stages of the examination. This may play a role in the higher satisfaction rate among candidates concerning communication. However, the ETS-run web page does not contain any information concerning roster management, and there is no website related to the NCRE recruitment process. It is the view of the Inspectors that there is a need to enlarge the coverage of the present NCRE website, and to develop and run an integrated website for the entire NCRE process, with the possibility of interaction with the candidates at all stages of the examination and recruitment process.

90. It is the opinion of the Inspectors that the introduction of a single point of contact in OHRM for NCRE candidates would improve communication. The possibility of OHRM using a customer relationships management system should also be examined. It is also obvious that a more integrated organizational structure within OHRM, covering both the NCRE examination and roster management under the same reporting line, would facilitate the solving of this issue. The staffing service informed the Inspectors that they are aware of this necessity and work is underway to address these problems, but at the time of the interview, there was no information available on the final decision, scope and the possible time frame of such a development.

91. Recommendation 8 will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the NCRE roster management and placement process.

Recommendation 8

The Secretary-General should elaborate and implement an action plan with a view to reorganizing the present NCRE roster management system to address the identified weaknesses, including the integrated recruitment and reassignment system at P-2 level, and strengthening its IT and website support and tools.

IV. THE WAY FORWARD: LOOK WIDER AND THINK FURTHER AHEAD

A. Look wider for more cooperation among United Nations system organizations

92. NCRE, the subject of this JIU review, is only relevant for recruitment to the United Nations Secretariat. Although other organizations within the United Nations system are applying the rules and policies of the common system, including human resources policies, NCRE is not part of that common system. Currently, there are significant differences in the methods and modalities of the selection and recruitment process applied to junior level posts by these organizations, which are connected with their mandates and the conditions under which they pursue their activities. At the same time, it is obvious that there are many similarities between them: their recruitment efforts are targeting the same potential applicants, often formulating very similar criteria for employment. It is against this background that the Inspectors undertook a limited review into the recruitment activities of some United Nations organizations, with a view to seeking out best practices and the possibility of a mutually beneficial interaction between them.

93. Currently, there are no complex competitive examination systems in the United Nations system organizations outside the United Nations Secretariat, but in certain of these organizations the selection process may entail examinations and the use of a roster for pre-selected candidates in some occupational groups. In some cases, important steps and initiatives have taken place in the wider and better use of computer technology in the application, as well as in the examination process, offering some useful experience for NCRE. Sometimes, a combination of the preliminary examination with actual vacancies is used to accelerate the recruitment process.

94. During this limited review, the Inspectors observed that there is no close cooperation or dynamic interaction between the officials responsible for entry-level recruitment in different United Nations system organizations. However, it is worth mentioning a positive example: UNHCR exempts those candidates who pass the United Nations NCRE examination in finance from taking its own International Professional Roster (IPR) test, and includes them automatically on the UNHCR roster for finance-related positions.

95. The Inspectors want to highlight that a large number of applicants or successful candidates on the roster also approach different organizations of the United Nations system as job seekers, and sometimes they go through a similar selection process in different organizations.

96. While it is normal for these organizations to compete for the same potential employees, there is no question that the operation of these parallel mechanisms and the almost total lack of cooperation between the human resources managers in this field constitute additional costs to be paid by the same Member States, even if they are paid from the budgets of different ministries of the same countries. The parallel testing of the same applicants means not only unnecessary additional costs, but results in delays in recruitment, and is a waste of financial and human resources. With the wider application of generic job descriptions in the organizations of the United Nations system, and the subsequent selection of candidates for their own rosters, these duplications and overlaps are even more obvious.

97. The Inspectors are of the view that closer cooperation between the human resources management of the United Nations system organizations is desirable on issues related to the competitive recruitment process. In some occupational groups such as Administration, Legal Affairs, External Affairs, Finance, Information Technology and Public Information, there are obvious possibilities for such cooperation.

98. At present due to a long waiting period before recruitment, some of the successful candidates on the NCRE roster will be lost to the United Nations in spite of the significant financial resources that were put into their identification. The Inspectors wish to emphasize that in general, the long waiting period on the NCRE roster is not connected with a lack of skills or quality of the candidates on the roster, but is rather due to inadequate labour force planning; to the changed geographic representation status of countries; to the different language requirements of specific vacant posts; or to the changed personal circumstances of the candidates. With better cooperation among the recruitment services, some of these tested candidates might be employed more easily and quickly by other United Nations organizations.

99. The technical details and the possible financial recovery of the test costs can be elaborated and agreed within the framework of the Human Resources Network of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). The mutual recognition of test results (as in the case of UNHCR) can also be discussed in this framework. It is the view of the Inspectors that such steps would help not only to contribute to more flexible roster management for the United Nations Secretariat, but also be beneficial for the recruitment processes of other United Nations organizations, and might improve and facilitate future inter-agency mobility, too.

100. The Inspectors would like to underline that it is not their intention to initiate any unified examination system for the United Nations organizations, but they are of the opinion that by using the Human Resources Network of CEB, there are possibilities for easing the existing tensions in the present recruitment systems, and reducing the existing or emerging overlaps of certain elements of the various competitive examination processes. Such endeavours would result in a positive outcome for the human resources management of the United Nations organizations as well as for the Member States.

101. While the Inspectors are aware of the significant differences in tasks and conditions the European Union and the United Nations are facing, it is appropriate to call the attention of the Human Resources Network of CEB to the integrated and single examination system of all the institutions of the European Union. The European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), which was established in 2002 for that purpose, in its four years of operation has developed and is operating a computerized, comprehensive, results-oriented, client-friendly examination system, providing large-scale services for participating institutions. In determining the long-term direction of the NCRE system, this experience is worth taking into account.

102. Recommendation 9 is intended to enhance coordination and cooperation among United Nations system organizations.

Recommendation 9

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chairman of CEB, should propose that the Human Resources Network of CEB review the possibility of cooperation, on a voluntary basis, among the United Nations system organizations concerning competitive recruitment examinations, roster management and related recruitment issues.

B. Think further ahead for the future NCRE

103. The current NCRE is a useful and important channel of the recruitment process, contributing significantly to provide the Organization with a highly qualified career labour force in the major occupational groups. However, various aspects of its operation can and should be

improved, inter alia, through the implementation of all the recommendations in this report. The United Nations Secretariat would thus be served with a better and more efficient competitive examination system without changing the basic parameters of NCRE.

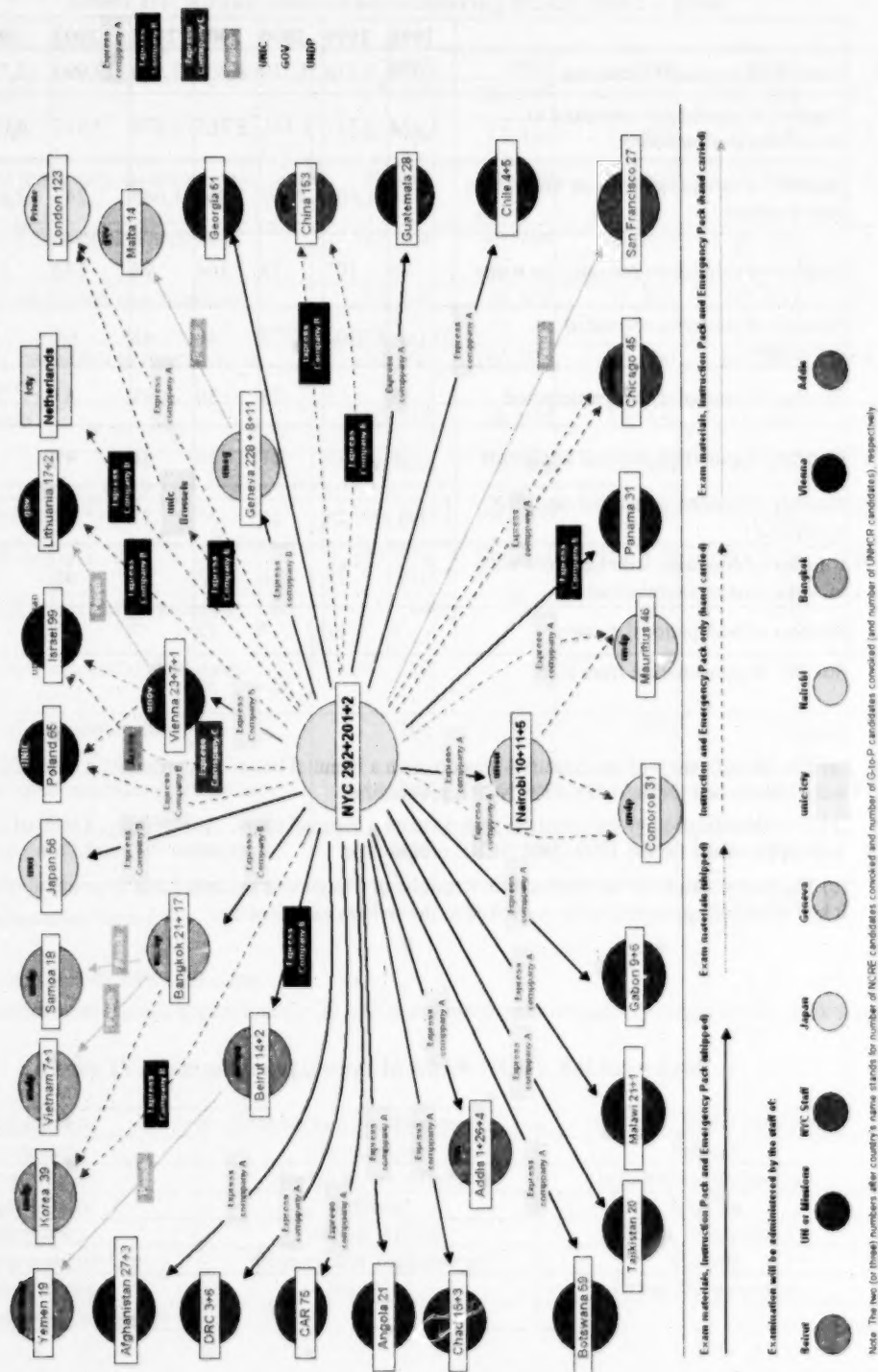
104. At the same time, it is the view of the Inspectors that the current traditional examination process entails too many manual, labour-intensive elements and requires complex, difficult logistical preparations. In its present organizational form, it is not possible to significantly increase the number of examinations or tested candidates.

105. However, human resources management has undergone significant changes as a consequence of the growth and expansion of United Nations activities, resulting in the growing demand for the long-term employment of professional staff for peacekeeping operations; the implementation of the mobility policy requiring dedicated, career international civil servants for United Nations activities in different parts of the world; and the projected harmonization in the contractual arrangements for United Nations staff. In this context it is to be decided, on the basis of long-term strategic labour force planning, whether NCRE is to be used on a larger scale for recruitment purposes than it is today; and whether, taking into account the positive performance assessment of NCRE-recruited staff, it should still be used only within the United Nations Secretariat, or be used more widely by the organizations of the United Nations system.

106. If the final decision is that a significantly higher number of young professionals be recruited through NCRE with a view to providing peacekeeping missions or some of the funds and programmes with entry-level staff, thought should be given as to how to reshape the organizational and technical framework of the competitive examinations system. Depending on the overall magnitude of future recruitment demands, there might be a need to conduct a feasibility study for the elaboration and operation of a more computerized, integrated competitive examination process, capable of processing a higher number of applicants and therefore providing a larger number of candidates for recruitment within a reasonably short period of time.

107. In this effort, due attention should be paid to existing best practices within and outside the United Nations system. The estimated costs of operation of a specialized unit to operate such a competitive examination should also be the subject of the aforementioned feasibility study. The Inspectors do not have the intention of launching such an initiative at the present time before the final decisions have been made on the related human resources policy of the United Nations, but they wish to call to the attention of Member States and the Secretariat that the long-term reshaping of NCRE should be decided subject to these decisions.

Annex I: Shipping routes of examination materials for NCRE held on 27 February 2007



Examination will be administered by the staff at:

Note: The two (or three) numbers after country's name stands for number of NC/RE candidates convoked and number of G-to-P candidates convoked (and number of UNHCR candidates), respectively.

Annex II: General statistics on NCRE (1998 -2006)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of applicants screened	5,814	8,214	3,719	8,809	7,506	13,994	12,731	14,364	2,732
Number of candidates convoked to the written examinations	1,274	2,247	1,146	3,165	2,479	3,911	4,033	3,515	1,190
Number of candidates who sat the written examinations	768	1,402	769	1,844	1,645	2,249	2,879	2,554	766
Number of candidates put onto the roster	49	107	75	164	94	172	163	221	55
Number of countries requested to participate	28 (a)	57(b)	27	46	41	64	71	69	60
Number of countries that participated	18	25	23	39	33	53	62	58	46
Number of countries that had applicants	18	25	21	36	31	49	58	58	41
Number of countries that had qualified applicants	17 (c)	25	21	35	27	49	58	57	39
Number of countries with nationals who took the written examinations	17 (c)	25	21	32	24	46	54	53	38
Number of occupational groups	8	11	7	12	7	8	8	8	7

Source: Documentation from ETS.

Notes:

(a) The identification of the countries was done on a biennial basis. Accordingly, a total of 28 Member States were approached for the 1998-1999 NCRE programme.

(b) The identification of the countries was done on a biennial basis. Accordingly, a total of 57 Member States were approached for the 1999-2000 NCRE programme.

(c) The examination for the Democratic Republic of Congo was cancelled due to political unrest even though it had qualified applicants to be convoked to the written examination.

Annex III: Annual costs of administering NCRE (2002 – 2006)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Secretariat costs*	737, 425	820, 305	911, 675	963, 890	897, 920
Consultancy fees	27, 000	17, 124	15, 938	12, 000	14, 000
Cost of general temporary assistance and overtime	36, 412	37, 720	32, 000	14, 250	3, 000
Printing costs of examination papers	17, 538	19, 596	17, 660	24, 325	7, 595
Travel costs to administer examinations	26, 300	29, 900	27, 900	47, 000	37, 000
Travel costs of candidates to interviews or videoconferences	150, 000	180, 000	180, 000	180, 000	60, 000
Advertising costs	10, 019	10, 800	10, 800	11, 400	10, 600
Shipping costs	16, 630	22, 600	28, 000	29, 000	15, 000
Board members costs**	100, 000	100, 000	100, 000	100, 000	85, 000
Total cost (US dollars)	1, 121, 324	1, 238, 045	1, 323, 973	1, 381, 865	1, 130, 115
Number of NCRE successful candidates	94	172	163	221	55
Number of G-to-P successful candidates	10	9	7	19	10
Total number of successful candidates	104	181	170	240	65
Cost per successful candidate (US dollars)	10, 782	6, 840	7, 788	5, 758	17, 386
Cost per tested candidate (US dollars)	629	526	435	509	1, 273

Source: Documentation from ETS.

* Secretariat costs include ETS staff costs.

** Board members costs include approximately 30 - 40 board members working an average of one week a year.

Annex IV: Occupational groups in which NCRE has been held

Administration	Architecture and Engineering	Associate Radio Producer
Demography	Economics	Finance
Human Rights	Humanitarian Affairs	Information technology
Legal Affairs	Library	Nursing
Photography	Political Affairs	Public Information
Publishing and printing	Science and Technology	Security
Social Affairs	Statistics	Urban Development
Web designers and developers		

Annex V: Successful candidates added to the roster, by geographical representation status (2002-2006)

Geographical representation status	2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
	Number of candidates	Percentage	Number of candidates	Percentage	Number of candidates	Percentage	Number of candidates	Percentage	Number of candidates	Percentage
From unrepresented countries	1	1	5	3	5	3	1	0.5	4	7
From underrepresented countries	49	52	18	10	58	36	75	34	23	42
From countries below midpoint	44	47	149	87	100	61	145	66	28	51
Total	94	100	172	100	163	100	221	100	55	100

Source: Documentation from ETS.

Annex VI: Countries invited to participate in NCRE, by geographical representation status (2002-2006)

Geographical representation status	2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
	Number of countries invited to participate	Number of countries with applicants	Number of countries invited to participate	Number of countries with applicants	Number of countries invited to participate	Number of countries with applicants	Number of countries invited to participate	Number of countries with applicants	Number of countries invited to participate	Number of countries with applicants
Unrepresented countries	19	13	17	9	16	11	15	8	17	9
Underrepresented countries	11	10	8	5	8	7	11	9	10	7
Countries below midpoint	11	8	39	35	47	40	43	41	31	24
Total	41	31	64	49	71	58	69	58	58	40

Source: Documentation from ETS

Annex VII: Recruitment of NCRE candidates from the roster, by geographical representation status (2002-2006)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of P-2 posts subject to geographical distribution	438	432	441	446	452
Total number of P-2 staff recruited through NCRE	79 (100)	63 (100)	69 (100)	87 (100)	91 (100)
Number of candidates from underrepresented countries	7 (8.9)	1 (1.8)	0 (-)	2 (2.3)	3 (3.3)
Number of candidates from underrepresented countries	17 (21.5)	16 (25.3)	10 (14.5)	21 (24.1)	17 (18.6)
Number of candidates from countries below the midpoint	45 (56.9)	24 (38.0)	39 (56.5)	29 (33.3)	43 (47.3)
Number of candidates from other countries	10 (12.7)	22 (34.9)	20 (29.0)	35 (40.3)	28 (30.8)

Sources: Documentation from ETS

Numbers in parenthesis are percentages

Overview of action to be taken by participating organizations on JIU recommendations
JIU/REP/2007/9

Specialized agencies and IAEA			United Nations, its funds and programmes																						
	Intended impact	United Nations*	UNCTAD	UNODC	UNEP	UN-HABITAT	UNHCR	UNRWA	UNDP	UNFPA	UNICEF	WFP	ILU	FAO	UNESCO	ICAO	WHO	UPU	ITU	WMO	IMO	WIPO	UNIDO	UNWTO	IAEA
			Report	For action	For information																				
Recommendation 1	e	L																							
Recommendation 2	e	E																							
Recommendation 3	e	E																							
Recommendation 4	e	E																							
Recommendation 5	E	E																							
Recommendation 6	e	E																							
Recommendation 7	e	E																							
Recommendation 8	E	E																							
Recommendation 9	e	E																							

Legend:
 L: Recommendation for decision by legislative organ
 E: Recommendation for action by executive head
 ■: Recommendation does not require action by this organization

Intended impact: a: enhanced accountability b: dissemination of best practices c: enhanced coordination and cooperation d: enhanced controls and compliance
 e: enhanced effectiveness f: significant financial savings g: enhanced efficiency o: other

* Covers all entities listed in ST/SGB/2002/11 other than UNCTAD, UNODC, UNEP, UN-HABITAT, UNHCR, UNRWA.